

Warm Waters

by Sid Hollister

Relatively speaking, that is. But to the swimmers of the Dolphin Club, the bracing bay waters lend a hospitable sense of community and renewal.

No matter what the season or the weather, taking to the waters of San Francisco Bay is always a bracing experience—even when El Nino pushes the water temperature up to a "tropical" 67 degrees. Whether you get in inch-by-inch, slide in sideways, or do the plunge-and-gasp dive, the water is always cold enough to bring you to your senses...or make you wonder if you haven't lost them entirely. To those of us who find this kind of swimming as essential as a good meal, the water's coldness is precisely what makes the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club (DSBC) so appealing.



Pilots leave Aquatic Park Cove for the Alcatraz swim.

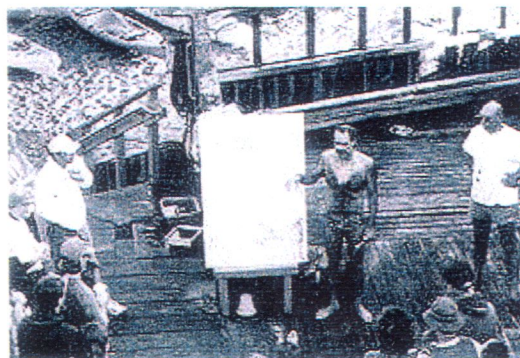
Photographer: Sid Hollister

Last year, feeling more stress than usual and in need of an athletic release, I signed up for the Club's out-of-cove swim program after eight years of swimming only in Aquatic Cove. This meant that if I completed three qualifying swims and helped or piloted swimmers on two swims I'd have the chance to tackle the two famous bay swims: the span of the Golden Gate Bridge, and from Alcatraz to the club's beach at Aquatic Park.

Since wind, waves, and tides are all bigger and more intense once you leave the cove's protection, I felt my share of fear facing the open waters. Daily swims of a mile or more gradually built up my physical stamina and, just as important, washed from my mind a lot of routine stress. The renewed sense of well-being that I was feeling, some say, is simply the effect of endorphins, but open-water swimmers know it's more complex than that. The mix of cold water, an awareness that one is a visitor in a wild oceanic world, the ever-changing tides and weather, and the comradeship of other swimmers all contribute to the renewal.

Once in the swim program, I was no longer a lone swimmer. I was part of a group of other orange-capped swimmers, piloted by veteran club members who insured that every swimmer made it home safely. Together, we were out there with the sea lions, harbor seals, cormorants, diving terns, and wave-skimming pelicans.

Now when I walk the beach at Crissy Field, I'm amazed that I completed both the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz swims. I think of veteran swimmers like Louis Gallic (93 years old), Mimi Osborne (63), and Joe Bruno, now over 80, who swims every day and has done the Golden Gate Bridge crossing 61 times—the first time while it was being built.



Dave Zovickian (at left) and Peter Bianucci deliver the pilot briefing before the 1997 Alcatraz swim.

Photographer: Sid Hollister

I'm sure that the spirits of hundreds of other swimmers are with every first-time bay swimmer, whether they're a part of the Dolphin Club (DSBC), founded in 1877, or the South End Rowing Club (SERC), established with its present name in the early 1880s. Neighbors since 1938 at Hyde and Jefferson Streets (as they were from 1908 to 1928 at the foot of Van Ness, and from 1928 to 1938 at the end of Polk Street), the two clubs have been an integral part of San Francisco's maritime history, which, like the history of any thriving port, has its rough spots. At times, members of both clubs gained some unwanted attention for such less-than-civic-minded activities as shanghaiing seamen, gambling, and absconding with entrusted funds.

In the century's early decades, rowing and handball were more popular than swimming at both clubs. That began to change when the clubs added saunas and later, in the mid-70s, when swimming gained popularity and women were admitted (in 1976) into the clubs. The swim programs expanded and competition in the swims intensified as the new women members won many of the swims. In addition, kayaks and open-water shells joined the wooden boats at the South End Rowing Club, a DSBC-SERC running program became part of the clubs' activities, and the Dolphin Club began to sponsor an annual Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon. The addition of women led, naturally, to marriages among members and the appearance of a new generation of potential club swimmers and rowers. Individual club members and relay teams have swum the Maui Channel, Lake Tahoe, and the English Channel.

Both clubs are open for public use on alternate days from Tuesday to Saturday, excepting use of the boats, which requires special training. Last year, close to 1,300 people used the clubs' facilities on a day basis, and among them, in the warm summer months, a good number of families with children enjoyed the beach. Membership in either club, which are both located on Jefferson Street at the foot of Hyde, is open to the public and costs about a dollar per day. The telephone number for the Dolphin Club is (415) 441-9329; for the South End Rowing Club, it's (415) 776-7372.

While rowing is still an important club activity and essential to the success of the swim programs, swimming in the bay draws most people to the clubs. That's especially true this year, because of El Nino, which has kept the water temperature over 60 degrees for months. Another few degrees, I've heard it said in our sauna, might take all the fun out of it. For those who get a spirit-healing lift from the water's coldness, there's more than a little truth to that.

Interviews with swimmers

Mimi Osborne



I joined the Dolphin Club in February of 1979, about two years after women won admission into the club, but I had been going to social events and taking my kids there since 1961, when my husband Dan joined. I would have joined earlier but I didn't feel I could swim very well, so I went to pools for a year until I could do the crawl well enough. I never went to a pool again.

Left: Osborne relaxes at the Dolphin Club before taking to the water.

Right: Osborne competes in the Santa Cruz swim.

Photographers: Dan Osborne and Barbara Keller

The main benefit to me is in spirit and outlook; the secondary one is health. The stimulus of swimming in the bay is visual, tactile, everything that has to do with the senses and it's never boring as it can be in a pool. The tides are always different, and the weather, and the birds; it's never the same. It's never lost its appeal and always gives me a general feeling of well-being that lasts for hours, especially when the water is below 54 degrees. The club helps me maintain my sanity in the modern world. I very much enjoy the company of the men and women members and find that my closest women friends now are in the club.

Lou Marcelli

I joined the club in 1965 but I swam off the beach at Aquatic Park from the time I was in high school at Galileo in the mid-'40s. I talked to Dolphin Clubbers all the time and they finally convinced me to join. It cost \$3 a month to belong then. I did all the swims and always finished last. In 1973, I got the job as caretaker and moved in here and kind of lost my incentive to swim.

I didn't swim again until 1994. The only thing I did for years was go fishing in Alaska in the summer. I'd come back in great shape but by January I'd lost it all. Then, one day, my girlfriend, Cynthia, said "let's go in" and we did a little swim. I felt great when I got out...you know...I got a real lift. Now, I do a half-mile four days a week with a group of four or five guys. We call ourselves the "Too Cheap to Quit Club," because the first guy to quit on any particular day has to buy the other guys lunch. It always feels good.

A lot of members live in North Beach, Russian Hill, Telegraph Hill just to be near the club. It's a great place to come and just turn everything off.

Walter Schneebeli

I joined the Dolphin Club in March 1948. I was working at the Steinhart Aquarium with my friend Fred Herms and he'd been a member since 1938. He brought me as a guest and I liked it. I took a short swim. I still remember the cold, but I noticed after a shower—we had no sauna then—that I felt better, felt really good.

We only had one 40-gallon water heater, so few people swam in the winter. We played handball instead. I did the Golden Gate for the first time in 1950, when that was our only annual swim—although we did have other swims like the Raccoon Straits swim from Angel Island to Tiburon. But you know we weren't really swimmers. If a guy had any training at all, he'd win all the swims. I grew up on Russian Hill next to Engine House 31 and some of those firemen were Dolphin Club members so it was natural for me to join. I would have joined as a kid but dues were \$1.50 a month and for me that was a lot of money. When I did join, Jimmy Cronin, who became a member in 1891, was still alive—he died in 1956—and talking to him and other old members got me interested in the club's history. I've been working on the files, all the collected material, since I retired 12 years ago. I'd like to turn it into a book.



Friends Marcelli (left) and Schneebeli chill out on the Dolphin Club beach.

Photographer: Sid Hollister



Paula Podolska

I joined the Dolphin Club in 1977, but since 1974 I had been swimming off the beach at Aquatic Park where we had only cold-water showers. In '75, '76, and '77, I swam the Golden Gate with a group of women known as the Waterbabies. Some of our pilots were from the Dolphin Club and the South End Rowing Club, but women couldn't join the Dolphin Club until October 1976.

Podolska reaches the ferry after finishing the Golden Gate swim.

Photographer: Barbara Keller

If I'm upset about something, I come to the club and swim and I feel better. It's beautiful. Sunset or sunrise, you never know what it will be like; today a flock of pelicans flew over. And no matter when you come, there's always someone to talk with. People here are from all the professions but at the club you don't have to pretend.

I always loved the water. In my country, Czechoslovakia, as a child, I was in the water so much that people called me "the Duck." And I've always loved swimming outdoors because I feel part of nature. I especially like it when it's choppy. It's more alive. You really feel that when you do the swims outside Aquatic Cove—especially the Gate and Alcatraz. You're more in the open ocean, the tides are stronger, and the waves are bigger, so big sometimes that you can't see your pilot. When I first did the Gate, I didn't think I could make it. It's a real challenge.



Louis Gallic, 3

Swimming has always been my favorite sport since I was a five-year-old living in France. It's funny, but I used to swim in Foster City, where I was one of the first builders, and at the Berkeley Marina, but for years I didn't know that you could swim at Aquatic Park. After I swam off the beach there for a few years, a Dolphin Club friend invited me to try the club, which is not really a traditional club—you have to give your time and good will to it. When you do, the club gives something back.

Club or no, swimming in the bay is like a cold bath. But you always feel better afterward, and it's more enjoyable now that the club has good hot showers and a sauna. Also it's not competitive as it is in a pool. I go off the beach and swim my few hundred yards every day and that's it. I taught my wife to swim and now she beats me. Well, she is half my age.

Escaping the chill, Gallic heads for the sauna after a dip at the Dolphin Club.

Photographer: Mark O'Hara